

AN ABORIGINAL CACHE OF FRESHWATER MUSSELS AT LAKE VICTORIA, NEW SOUTH WALES

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On 20 September, 1968, Simpson discovered an unusual accumulation of freshwater mussel (*Velesunio ambiguus*) shells, newly exposed by erosion in the sands of the luncte on the E. side of Lake Victoria, Talgarry Station, New South Wales.

Unlike the many other mussel shell concentrations found in the district during the course of the Chowilla Project, this group was well organized, did not comprise single valves and was obviously not a midden deposit. All the valves were in pairs, not gaping, and had been alive when buried. A number of shells had fallen away from the group since it was exposed, but those that remained were neatly stacked, horizontally oriented, in a close-packed and generally rounded group which measured c. 33 x 51 x 20 cm (Pl. 13, fig. 6).

Within the mass, the shells were stacked in 12 to 13 layers, each layer containing 25 to 30 shells. Assuming 28 shells in 13 layers, the total number present, not counting those fallen away, is in excess of 360.

The mussel shells were of the rounded, symmetrical lacustrine form, clearly separable from the longer-valved asymmetrical riverine form (McMichael and Hiscock 1958, p. 382). External surfaces of many valves were flaking, and were pitted, due to weathering.

The group of shells was buried at a depth of c. 80 cm below the modern sand surface at the side of a deflation hollow (7/8 S. of the pegged sequence of gulches) and intrusive into the Talgarry Sand (Gill, this *Memoir*) on Talgarry Station, New South Wales. The depth from the original dune surface was almost certainly greater than 80 cm.

We interpret the buried mussels as an Aboriginal food store or cache. It indicates that mussels were not always eaten as soon as collected, but sometimes stored for future use.

Just how widespread this custom was, remains to be discovered. Dr I. D. Hiscock (Zoology Department, Monash University) has had mussels out of water (in a cardboard box in a laboratory) for 6 years with a high percentage of survival. Certainly the species could easily live without submersion for weeks to months, especially if buried deeply in damp sand.

To collect 360+ mussels probably would not take very long, given a normal abundance. As illustration, Hiscock and two other persons collected 600 mussels in one hour, from a shallow stretch of the Little Murray River near Swan Hill, Victoria, April 1972. Hiscock has an advantage in that he studies freshwater mussels professionally, and is skilled in their location and collection. In his experience mussels tend to be less abundant in lakes and lagoons than in the rivers. He concedes that Aboriginals should be even speedier in collecting mussels under natural conditions in their own territory.

We suggest that other anthropological workers look for the difference (ecophenotypic variation) between the lacustrine and riverine forms of *Velesunio ambiguus* shells. The general source of the mussels can thus be determined, and there may be occasions when this information would be useful.

The cache was excavated and coated externally with 'Aquadhere' prior to its removal as a display specimen for the National Museum. Unfortunately, before it was sufficiently dry for removal, torrential rain caused its collapse; the shells were then simply brought back loose.

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References

- McMICHAEL, D. F., and HISCOCK, I. D. 1958. A monograph of the freshwater mussels (Mollusca, Pelecypoda) of the Australian region. *Aust. J. mar. freshwat. Res.* 9: 372-508.